Variable-contrast filters are easy to use, readily available, and inexpensive. However, the individual filters also are easy to lose and scratch (or otherwise damage). Variable-contrast enlarging heads are available for some enlarger models; these are more expensive than variable-contrast filters, but provide a far more efficient and convenient method of adjusting contrast when you use variable-contrast papers. Such heads have built-in filters, allowing you to simply dial in the desired contrast grade. Also, they allow even finer incremental changes in contrast than the half and full steps allowed by individual filters.

Another contrast-adjusting alternative is to use enlargers used for color printing. These have a color head, a head containing a chamber that mixes yellow, magenta, and cyan light. Dialing in increments of one color or another allows printers to adjust the overall color when making color prints. For making black-and-white prints, you can use the yellow and magenta controls to simulate the colors of variable-contrast filters—yellow for low contrast and magenta for high contrast. Keep the cyan dial set to zero.

The following chart is a guide to color and contrast equivalents when using color heads with variable-contrast papers. The units refer to the designated increments you must dial in:

Contrast Equivalent	Color Units
#0	yellow
#½	yellow
#1	yellow
#1½	yellow
#2	yellow
#2 ½	magenta
#3	magenta
#3½	magenta
#4	magenta
#4½	magenta
#5	magenta

Note that this is a very rough guide. You will get different results with different brands of printing paper and different enlargers. Follow instructions provided by your specific paper or enlarger manufacturer, or start with the above chart and make adjustments.